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ABSTRACT

The decisions parents make regarding their children's education are not based solely on the academic quality of the school. Therefore, initiating a parental-choice educational program will not necessarily improve the overall level of education that American children are currently receiving. An area of concern is children who are economically disadvantaged: children who attend schools in lower income, innercity areas. These children will be affected the most by a parental choice program, though whether the effects would be adverse or beneficial is unclear at this point. A total of 39 lower, lower/middle, and upper/middle class white families were interviewed in 1984, and again in 1985. Special areas of study were (1) differences in enrollment patterns among neighborhoods; (2) similarities/differences in parental perceptions of academic quality among schools; (3) other parental criteria in school enrollment decisions; and (4) factors influencing enrollment outcomes. The school environment, both internal and external, plays a vital role in enrollment decisions, as do education-related costs, parents' childhood educational experiences, and community support. (28 references) (KM)

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Parental Choice and Quality Education

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The Issue:

One of the major domestic policy issues addressed by the Reagan Administration has been the perceived decline in the quality of elementary and secondary education in America during the 1960's and 70's. The National Commission on Excellence in Education's 1983 report, A Nation at Risk, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, highlighted the decline in Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores as evidence of this problem.

The president's list of proposals for reform of elementary and secondary education begins with parental choice. Arguing that "diversity and competition among schools should be encouraged, not discouraged". Reagan (1985) has advocated compensatory education vouchers and tuition tax credits, as well as public school choice programs.

The concept of parental choice appears to have widespread support. When the 1987 Gallup Poll asked "should school parents have the right to choose their child's school?", 76% of public school parents and 81% of nonpublic school parents answered "yes" (Walker, 1987). The National Governors' Association (1986) has endorsed parental choice among public schools subject to racial balance considerations.

Parental choice proposals permitting public financial support for private schools are more controversial. By similarly narrow margins, those interviewed by the Gallup organization support voucher systems but oppose tax support for parochial schools (Gallup 1986, Walker 1987).

In the debate over parental choice, one of the major unresolved issues is whether the quality of education available to students would improve or decline if various specific proposals were implemented.

The Arguments:

Advocates of parental choice in education have long argued that permitting parents to choose their children's schools would result in improvements in the quality of education for all children.

Milton Friedman, (1962, 1973, 1980), the modern originator of the concept of parental choice (though the idea has been traced back to Thomas Paine, Adam Smith and J.S. Mill), has long advocated a system of education vouchers. Friedman argues that a free market in education

would result in improved quality of education for everyone, but especially for those children in inner city schools where educational outcomes are currently the poorest. He envisions a system in which new suppliers, including profit-making enterprises, compete for the education dollar much as they do for the consumer's food dollar.

The Center for the Study of Public Policy (1970), then headed by Christopher Jencks, advocated a voucher plan with restrictions to enhance the competitive position of less advantaged parents. In addition to educational diversity CSPP has cited "active parental interest" in the schools selected (a non-market factor) as a contributing factor in school improvement through choice. John Coons and Stephen Sugarman, who have also advanced a proposal for restricted vouchers, have sought to justify parental choice based on parents' knowledge of and caring for their children.

James S. Coleman (1981, 1982, 1987) has advocated "educational choice for all" based on the assumption that parents would choose schools based on "functional communities" or "communities of interest." Such communities, he has argued, would be able to reach a consensus on the nature of school authority, and would therefore have a stronger basis for promoting student achievement. He cites Catholic schools as examples of "functional communities", and offers evidence suggesting that their student outcomes are indeed superior to those of public schools, especially public schools which lack a strong consensus on student behavior standards.

In contrast to those advocating voucher plans which include private schools, Mario Fantini (1973) has argued that the diverse needs of students could be accommodated by public schools if public school systems would encourage a diversity of teaching/learning styles among schools and allow parents to make choices on that basis. Mary Anne Raywid (1987) likewise endorses public schools of choice while rejecting voucher plans. She cites several benefits of public schools of choice plans, including higher student motivation, increased parental satisfaction, and greater autonomy for staff at the building level as well as in their individual classrooms. However, she believes that vouchers would result, especially in larger cities, in a two-tiered system of schools: private schools serving the affluent, public schools serving the poor. Under such an arrangement, poor students who need quality education most would be concentrated in those inner city schools least able to provide it.

The same criticism, however, can also be leveled at programs for parental choice among public schools. Jomills Henry Braddock (1981), for example, has pointed out that while magnet school and alternative school programs within public education may have raised educational outcomes for some students, "little attention has been given to the educational consequences for minority students in particular who, either by choice or by luck of the draw, are excluded from participation in highly specialized school programs". Creaming of higher status and more able students, he suggests, may have left other students isolated without successful role models in schools in which quality education is even more difficult to provide.

Evidence from the Alum Rock public school voucher demonstration project may be interpreted as supporting Braddock's concern. Bridge and Blackman (1978) report that when parents in the Alum Rock School District (in a predominantly low income section of San Jose (CA) with a Mexican-American majority) were given a choice among public elementary schools, 70% cited "location of school" as a major factor in their decisions, compared to 32.0% who mentioned program features, 18.9% who spoke of general attributes of school and 18.0% who commented on the principal and/or teachers. Furthermore, preferences for program features (highly structured programs stressing "the basics" vs. less structured programs emphasizing other subjects) tend to split along social class lines. Bridge (1978) argues that parent choices are justified only when they are based on "educationally relevant" criteria, a standard which many parents apparently fail to meet. He concludes that decisions based on other criteria are a consequence of "information imperfections" which must be overcome before any program of choice is implemented.

In summary, then the debate over parental choice focuses on one particular segment of the school population: the estimated 30 percent of students from low income families (many of them minority students living in inner cities) who, as former Secretary of Education Terrell Bell has recently noted (Reinhold, 1987), have yet to be significantly affected by the educational reform measures adopted in the past five years. Opponents of parental choice fear that such students would be left even farther behind by some or all parental choice plans, while advocates of such plans say schools could hardly get any worse in the inner cities and could improve significantly, especially, some argue, if special services and restrictions favored such students.

The Research:

A demonstration project such as the one under taken in the Alum Rock School District requires a very substantial commitment of resources. Fortunately, it is possible to learn a good deal about parental choice in school enrollment by investigating what parents already do under prevailing conditions. Even under a system of public education in which enrollment is determined solely on the basis of residence, some parents engage in choice of school by basing their housing choices at least in part on school preferences, while other parents give serious consideration to nonpublic schools. In addition, a growing number of school desegregation programs are "voluntary", offering student transfers to other public schools (including magnet schools) consistent with racial balance.

This study was conducted in the City of Syracuse, New York, one of the many city school districts which have attempted to integrate their elementary schools through voluntary transfers and magnet schools. In addition, the city has a large Catholic population which supports about a dozen Catholic elementary schools. Several other small private schools also operate in the city. Finally, Syracuse families, like others elsewhere, are residentially mobile (Maddaus, 1987 a, b).

"Eisenhower" Elementary School serves an attendance area which includes three types of neighborhoods: lower middle income white, low income white and low income black. Nearly "Hoover" and "Truman" Schools serve predominantly middle and upper middle income white neighborhoods.

During May, June and July 1984, a door-to-door survey was conducted in five white neighborhoods: "Canal Town", a low income neighborhood in the Eisenhower attendance area, "Parkside" and "Hilltop", two lower middle income neighborhoods also in the Eisenhower attendance area, "The Village", a middle income neighborhood in the Hoover attendance area, and "The Acres", an upper middle income neighborhood in the Truman attendance area. (See Figure 1).

Data were collected on elementary school enrollment for the 1983-84 school year and anticipated enrollment for the 1984-85 school year.

Parents who anticipated were enrolling their children in different schools in 1984-85 than the ones they had attended in 1983-84, or who were even considering such a change, were approached for interviews. Interviews were

Figure 1
Neighborhoods, Schools
and Public School Attendance Areas

	+ St. Dorothy's School		
	Hoover		
	Attendance	X Hoover	
	Area	School	
	- - - - -		
	THE VILLAGE		
	- - - - -		

	Truman	- - - - -	Eisenhower
	Attendance	HILLTOP	Attendance
	Area	- - - - -	Area
	X Truman		
	School		
	- - - - -		+ St. Maura's
	THE ACRES		School
	- - - - -	- - - - -	
	PARKSIDE	X Eisenhower	
-----	- - - - -	School	
	- - - - -		
+ St. Ita's	CANAL TOWN		
School	- - - - -		

also requested if parents considered more than one option for Kindergarten enrollment in 1984-85. Thirty-nine in-depth interviews were completed between May and August 1984, with follow-up interviews between October 1984 and January 1985. Twelve of those interviewed lived in Canal Town, thirteen in Parkside and Hilltop, and fourteen in The Village and The Acres. Twenty-six of the interviews were conducted with the mothers only (five of whom were single parents), two were with fathers only (one was a single parent) and ten were with both parents. Family background data was also obtained from these families. (See table 1).

During 1985, the New York State Education Department, as part of the State Board of Regents Action Plan, reviewed statewide achievement test scores for the approximately 6,300 public and private elementary and secondary schools in the state. Based on this review, the Board of Regents, in November 1985, released a list of approximately 600 schools which were "most in need of improvement." Eisenhower School was one of the schools on this list; Hoover and Truman were not. (Note: When this list was revised in March, 1988, Eisenhower's test scores had improved sufficiently that it was no longer included (Cox, 1988, Cawthon, 1985).

Based on the State Education Department's review of test scores in 1985, students at Eisenhower School performed poorly on these tests at the time the field work for this study was conducted. However, such test score information was not readily available to parents at that time. How, then, did parents, lacking such information, evaluate the quality of education at Eisenhower compared to that at other nearby schools? And what part did educational quality play in their school enrollment decisions?

The Findings:

(1) Differences in enrollment patterns among neighborhoods: Based on the door-to-door survey, there were very substantial differences between neighborhoods in the percentages of students enrolled in different types of schools during the 1983-84 school year (See Table 1).

The most striking difference is in neighborhood school enrollment: 62% of Canal Town students attended Eisenhower, very similar to the 63% of The Village and The Acres children who attended Hoover and Truman respectively. But only 7% of Parkside and Hilltop children attended Eisenhower.

As regards those children who attend schools other than their neighborhood public schools, the relative proportion in private schools rather than other public schools increases with family income. This is hardly surprising, given the cost of private school tuition. However, due to

the very low percentage of children from Parkside and Hilltop enrolled at Eisenhower, the percentage of children from these two neighborhoods enrolled in private schools exceeds that for The Village and The Acres, despite higher family income levels in the latter neighborhoods.

The door-to-door survey data for The Village and The Acres are very close to the statistics reported by the Syracuse City School District (1985) for the Hoover and Truman attendance areas taken as a whole. Statistics for Eisenhower's large and diverse attendance area fall within the extremes found in the neighborhood survey. For the city as a whole, 49.33% of students attended their "home" (i.e. neighborhood public) schools in the Fall of 1983, 29.28% attended school "out of attendance area" (i.e. other public schools within the city), and 21.39% were enrolled "in non-public schools." However, there were wide variations from these citywide averages from one attendance area to another. The percentage range was 34% for neighborhood public schools, 50% for other public schools and 47% for non-public schools. Thus, a difference of 55% in neighborhood school attendance rates for smaller neighborhoods within an attendance area is not unrealistic.

The question remains, however: Why are there such large differences among neighborhoods in school attendance patterns? Do perceptions of academic quality play a part in the school enrollment decisions reflected in these neighborhood data? If not, how else might we account for these differences? For answers to these questions, we must turn to the interview data for the neighborhoods in the study.

Table 1

Neighborhoods	Canal Town	Parkside & Hilltop	The Village & The Acres
Neighborhood public school(s)	Eisenhower	Eisenhower	Hoover, Truman
Number of students in door-to-door survey	71	67	89
Percentage of students attending:			
neighborhood public school	62%	7%	63%
other public schools	25%	40%	6%
Catholic schools	10%	50%	21%
other private schools	3%	3%	10%
Number of families interviewed	12	13	14
Income level	low	lower middle	middle & upper middle
father's educational level	some high school	some college	bachelor's degree
mother's educational level	high school graduate	some college	bachelor's degree
father's occupations	unskilled manual labor	skilled manual labor	business
mother's occupations	clerical, sales	clerical, sales	teachers, homemaker

(2) Similarities and differences in parental perceptions of academic quality among schools: In the absence of any reliable information about academic outcomes, parents still made some judgements about the quality of academic programs. In some respects, these judgements were very similar regardless of socioeconomic background. For example, parents were virtually unanimous in their belief that there were few significant differences among public schools in regards to curriculum or teaching methods. The Distar reading program in some schools was mentioned by 2 parents (both public school teachers), while several parents noted the existence of outstanding music programs in two or three schools. But with these exceptions, public schools were regarded as nearly identical in the academic programs they offered. So firmly was this view held that some parents (including two public school teachers) discounted the possibility of significant differences in instruction below grade 5 at one of the city's magnet schools despite the fact that it features math and science.

Not surprisingly, therefore, parents in all neighborhoods tended to regard the skills of individual teachers as the primary variable in their children's school experiences. To the extent that teachers did figure in school enrollment decisions, parents tended to focus on the teachers their children would have in the coming year, with the result that Kindergarten teachers were more important than those at higher grade levels. But parents also believed that there were both good and bad teachers in every school, so that teacher quality often was not a factor in public school enrollment. Instead, some families were more concerned with trying to influence which teachers their children would have within the school they had chosen for other reasons.

Another similarity across income levels was that most parents expressed a preference for small class sizes, reasoning that their children would get more individual attention as a result.

There were also some differences in the ways that parents at different socioeconomic levels perceived academic quality. One notable difference was that middle income families had higher standards of academic success for their children than did low income parents. College educated parents were more likely to worry about a child who "had a slide through year" and "wasn't challenged", but since their children didn't go to Eisenhower they had little opportunity to judge that school in this regard. Low income parents, on the other hand, were usually satisfied if their children "learned the basics" and passed, which for several families with children at Eisenhower was not something to be taken for granted.

Some Canal Town parents expressed concern that too many children, their own and/or others in the neighborhood, were being held back at Eisenhower, and felt that perhaps the open classrooms at Eisenhower were at least partly responsible for their difficulties. Middle income parents were largely unaware of this feature of Eisenhower. If they knew of it at all, it certainly did not have an appeal sufficient to attract them to the school, but nor was it a negative consideration in and of itself. On the other hand, low income parents were unanimous in their surprise at such a school design, and nearly unanimous in their feeling that it wasn't working for their children. They attributed some of their children's academic difficulties to the noise level and other distractions which resulted from this design.

Low income Catholic parents usually expressed strong support for Catholic schools, which they viewed as having dedicated teachers who devoted their efforts to insuring that students "learned the basics." Middle income parents were more likely to express concern regarding the "lack of resources" for Catholic schools and the less well qualified teachers who would accept the lower salaries such schools offered. Insofar as academics were the determining factor, such parents preferred the wider array of programs in public schools and the superior credentials of their teacher.

In summary, then, a majority of the low income families interviewed were critical of some academic aspects of Eisenhower school and/or preferred Catholic schools for academic reasons, whereas most middle income families had very little if any information about the quality of academic program at Eisenhower but had greater reservations about Catholic schools. In short, parental perceptions of academic quality do not account for the differences among neighborhoods in school attendance patterns.

(3) Other parental criteria in school enrollment decisions: The existing research literature suggests a variety of possible parental criteria for school enrollment in addition to academic quality: location, discipline, religion, socioeconomic status, race, size of school, child's preferences, parental involvement, prior enrollment by older siblings or friends, and financial cost, among others (Bridge and Blackman, 1978; Clerico, 1983; Darling-Hammond and Kirby, 1985; Gratiot, 1980; Nault and Uchitelle, 1982).

For most Parkside and Hilltop families, the issue with respect to enrollment at Eisenhower was summed up by one father as follows:

"We didn't like the neighborhood. It's sort of an inner city, lower socioeconomic neighborhood. We were concerned about our children's safety and we were afraid that they would be so concerned about their

environment that they couldn't study. The kids around there are street-wise, and our kids aren't. We didn't want them being exposed to kids who were aggressive and bullying. We were afraid they would be picked on. We didn't want them in that kind of environment."

Most of these parents did not actually use the term "environment". But a multitude of similar terms ("atmosphere", "discipline", "behavior", "values", "strictness", "safety", "authority", "attitudes", "standards"), sometimes supported by anecdotes or verbal images, convey the same concerns. In part, these terms relate to the situation within the school itself. They viewed their own children as being in danger from other children in school, with teachers and administrators unable or unwilling (in contrast to Catholic schools in the same or similar neighborhoods) to uphold and enforce the standards of behavior they felt were appropriate. But their concerns also applied to the trip to and from school as well, to walking (they did not live far enough away to ride the bus) through an unsafe neighborhood.

Some Canal Town parents shared these concerns, although not to the extent of considering other schools. Some of these parents, lacking cars, preferred to have their children attend school within walking distance so they could get to school in an emergency. Some expressed a traditional belief in neighborhood schools. For these and other reasons they chose not to transfer their children despite having concerns about the school environment. Rather, they taught their children how to cope and/or developed other means of protecting them. In whatever ways they could, they tried to manage their children's moral and social environment (e.g. walking with them between home and school, regulating their play activities, finding organized programs for them to participate in).

For Parkside and Hilltop parents, however, such efforts included choosing other schools. Hilltop parents gravitated toward nearby Hoover school, or to St. Dorothy's (see Figure 1). Some Parkside families, who were much closer to Eisenhower and physically cut off from other middle income neighborhoods, focused their childrearing on St. Maura's parish and school. In either case, they identified with communities unrelated to Eisenhower, communities which included but extended beyond a particular school. They viewed their children's needs holistically, weighing the impact of school enrollment on what happened outside school as well. They wanted their children to go to school with the children they played with in their "close-knit, safe, secure" neighborhoods, and to grow up under the influence of the standards of behavior shared by the adults of those communities.

(4) Factors influencing enrollment outcomes: On the central issue of "environment", the range of perceptions and preferences among the parents interviewed was relatively narrow. Most of the Canal Town parents expressed some preference for living elsewhere, partly because of the poor condition of housing in Canal Town but also because they preferred a neighborhood that was more "safe and secure" and had "better" schools. The bottom line, in most cases, was money. They simply could not afford to rent, much less own, a home in Hilltop or The Village, much as they might have preferred to. The same financial constraint applied to most of those who expressed an interest in Catholic schools. They did not think they could afford to pay the tuition. Families in other neighborhoods sometimes complained about the higher cost of housing (a few would have moved to the suburbs if they could have afforded it), or the cost of Catholic school tuition, but they found ways to pay one and sometimes both.

A second factor influencing enrollment outcomes was the existence of strong neighborhood social networks in some neighborhoods. Such networks were strongest in Parkside, Hilltop, and The Village, especially for those Catholics whose neighborhood ties were reinforced by participation in their parish churches. Such neighborhood networks were sources of information, however selective, about schools, and also tended to reinforce prevailing attitudes, thus accounting in part for the virtual unanimity with which Parkside and Hilltop families came to the same conclusions about Eisenhower and acted accordingly. Those few Parkside and Hilltop families who sent their children to Eisenhower were newcomers and/or otherwise socially isolated within these neighborhoods.

In contrast, the social relationships in Canal Town were much weaker, due in part to higher mobility rates. As a result, those who were dissatisfied with Eisenhower rarely realized that some of their neighbors shared that perception, and those who were enrolling their oldest children in Kindergarten did not usually know that others may have experienced difficulties. Often their main contacts with other parents in the neighborhood were through the parents group connected with the pre-kindergarten program, which tended to supply mostly positive information about the school as a whole.

Third, while middle income parents had few doubts about their ability to make decisions on behalf of their children or their responsibility for doing so, some low income parents viewed themselves as less capable of doing so, especially with regard to academic matters. While these low income parents believed that they understood their children's behavior as well or better than some teachers and

administrators, several of them had performed so poorly in school themselves that they felt incapable of assisting their children academically. The major exceptions were those parents who, through experiences such as being teachers aides or parent volunteers in the public school pre-Kindergarten program or the Headstart program, had experienced success as adults in educational settings.

(5) Summary of findings: The New York State Education Department has determined that, at the time of this study, Eisenhower school ranked among the lowest 10% of schools in the state in terms of student outcomes on statewide achievement tests. At this time, most parents in the Parkside and Hilltop neighborhoods chose to enroll their children at other schools even though they lived within the Eisenhower attendance area. However, there is little evidence to suggest that they did so because of concern about academic programs or outcomes at Eisenhower.

Rather, the evidence suggests that these parents made their decisions primarily on the basis of their perceptions of the neighborhood surrounding Eisenhower and their assumptions, supported by anecdotes of some neighborhood parents, regarding the behavior of children in and around the school. These parents chose to send their children to other public schools or to parochial schools, thus creating a more homogeneously low income student population than would otherwise have been the case, with probable consequences for test scores.

As for the low income parents of Canal Town, a significant number expressed concerns about the academic quality of Eisenhower, with some making alternative arrangements (mainly through transfers to other public schools) while others did not. Among the constraints on Canal Town parents were the costs of some alternatives, lack of knowledge about schools and lack of social support for their concerns due in part to weak social networks, and lack of confidence in their ability to make decisions about their children's schooling, especially with regard to academics.

The Implications:

Is parental choice an effective means to promoting quality education? If by "quality education" we mean improved instructional inputs and/or higher achievement outcomes, this study suggests that the linkage between parental choice and quality education is at best a weak one, constrained by a complex array of other parental criteria and constraints on decision-making.

To be sure, the situation at Eisenhower school is a less than perfect test (as was the Alum Rock public school voucher demonstration project) of the parental choice

concept. Information regarding academic inputs and outcomes as extremely limited for all families. Voluntary transfers were available, although constrained by the racial balance criterion, but the costs of other options remained unchanged.

Even so, there are several lessons to be learned from this study.

(1) Some parents are already making choices in school enrollment, based on the options currently available to them. When voluntary transfers were instituted, this did not stop some parents from continuing to use other means to achieve the school enrollments they wanted for their children. The same would be true for any new "parental choice" program.

(2) Parents' criteria for school enrollment include a diverse range of considerations and the relative importance attached to any given consideration also varies. Even with information about academic inputs and outcomes, many parents would continue to give at least some consideration to other criteria as well. Some of these criteria can be satisfied within a system of public education, but others (most notably religious instruction; also standards of behavior rooted in religious belief and supported by religious communities) cannot.

(3) The most important criterion for many parents in this study is summarized in the term "environment" and its many related concepts. To the extent that "environment" refers to student behavior within a school, it is at least potentially subject to control by the school staff (not, however, any easy task). To the extent that this term also applies to what goes on in the neighborhood between home and school, it may be largely outside the school's control. (The fact that academic outcomes have improved at Eisenhower in the past two years does not necessarily mean that Parkside and Hilltop parents will view this as reason to enroll their children there. While it may signal some improvement in the environment within the school, given our knowledge on conditions conducive to learning, it probably says little if anything about the school's external environment).

(4) Another significant criterion in school enrollment is that of community (i.e. the replication and reinforcement of positive social relationships within the school by the same or parallel social relationships outside the school). Many parents value the positive social relationships available in some schools and their surrounding communities but not in others.

(5) Communities are also a very important context for parental decision-making. In "close-knit" communities, neighbors provide each other information about schools as

well as reinforcement for prevailing perceptions of schools. Low income parents may have weaker community support systems, although this might be overcome by successful efforts at community organizing or by existing community institutions (e.g. in many black neighborhoods, black churches perform this role for their members).

(6) Parents' personal life experiences (both as children and adults) are also very important in how they approach possible decisions and in what outcomes result. Childhood school experiences have left some parents better prepared than others to make decisions about their own children's schooling. But adult experiences, especially in educational programs, may have significant effects as well.

(7) Money is, if not the bottom line, then a very significant influence on school enrollment outcomes. While some parents may make seemingly heroic sacrifices to ensure their children attend the school of their choice, for the most part family income is closely associated with both housing choice and private school enrollment.

(8) Social stratification in American education is, if not the American way of life, at the very least an important part of our educational reality, whatever the motives of those involved may be. The two-tiered system of education feared by some opponents of parental choice is only a more extreme form of what we already have. It requires considerable optimism/pessimism to believe that any parental "choice" program will substantially alter that reality one way or the other.

Should local, state or Federal governments institute parental choice programs? The answer to this question requires ethical as well as social scientific judgement. My ethical judgement is that we ought to at least experiment with parental choice programs which, like Headstart and food stamps, are targeted at low income families, and which, unlike the Reagan administration's compensatory voucher program, provide sufficient benefits to make a real difference. My social scientific judgement is that such programs probably would not eliminate social stratification in American education, but they could give low income families somewhat more influence over the schooling their children receive and make some contribution to improving outcomes for such children.

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